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THE LAST VESTIGE OF PURITANISM IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF MASSACHUSETTS¹

J. MACE ANDRESS

State Normal School, Worcester, Massachusetts

It is a law of history that the spirit of a religious or political philosophy when it vanishes leaves behind it numberless dead or dying forms. Long-established habits and devotion to the symbols of the past prevent the clothing of new feelings and ideas in a new garb. It is only under the pressure of changing social conditions that the old forms are gradually modified.

Massachusetts offers no exception to this rule. Puritanism is no more, but some of its modified forms have persisted down to our own day. Perhaps the last vestige of its influence finds an echo in a law of 1862 which still remains in force. This law enacts that "a portion of the Bible shall be read daily in the public schools, without written note or oral comment."² To understand the power which gave rise to this law it is necessary to review rapidly some of the phases of the history of Massachusetts.

The Puritan can be understood only in the light of the world's great religious movement toward reform.³ Under the papal dominion the church had been the source of all authority; but the followers of the Reformation turned from the church to the Bible for guidance. No religious sect ever embraced this principle with greater enthusiasm than the Puritans.

The Puritans who founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony conceived the state as a biblical commonwealth. This was clearly shown in 1644 when a contention arose concerning the power of

¹ The writer wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to the Harvard Library and to the Boston Public Library, through whose courtesy he had access to many old text-books and to many valuable documents and books relating to the early history of Massachusetts.

² *Revised Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Relating to Public Instruction*, Boston, 1909, chap. xlii, sec. 19.

³ Ellis, *The Puritan Age in Massachusetts*, Boston, 1891, chap. iv.

the magistrates. The matter was referred to the elders for arbitration. They affirmed that, in the case of the vacancy of the general court, the magistrates "may act in cases wherein there is no expresse law, soe that in such acts they proceed according to the word of God."¹

It is a significant fact that during the first few years of the colony life much of the legislation was suggested by sermons, and bills were frequently presented to the elders for their approval before they were passed. In fact, the first two civil codes used by the colonists were drawn up by ministers.²

Many of the early decisions of the General Court reflect the attempts to administer justice not only in the spirit but in the letter of the biblical law. It is not uncommon to find in the records such statements as these:³

It is ordered that John Baker shalbe whipped for shooteing fowle on the Sabbath Day.

It is ordered that Josias Plastowe shall (for stealeing 4 basketts of corne from the Indians) retourne them 8 basketts againe.

The first legislative enactment,⁴ that houses should be built for the ministers "with convenient speede att publique charge," showed the union of church and state. This union showed itself also in the legal prosecution of those sects which were not Puritan, in the limiting of the franchise and office-holding to members of the established church, and in the support of that church by public taxation. It was not until 1833 that the state constitution was finally amended so that the legislature lost its power to compel provision for public Protestant worship.⁵ Down to 1821 the oath of office also prevented Jews from holding the offices of governor, lieutenant-governor, and councilor.⁶ However, it is outside of the limitations of this brief paper to follow the great battles for religious liberty which were waged in Massachusetts, chiefly under the leadership of the Baptists.

¹ *Records of Massachusetts* (edited by Shurtleff), Boston, 1853, Vol. II, p. 91.

² Clark, *Congregational Churches in Massachusetts*, Boston, 1858, pp. 351, 205.

³ *Records of Massachusetts*, Vol. I, p. 82. ⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 73.

⁵ *Constitution of Massachusetts*. Part the First, art. III; Articles of Amendment, XI.

⁶ *Ibid.*, chap. vi, art. I; Amendment VI.

It does seem pertinent to inquire about the Puritan attitude toward children.

The Puritans regarded the nature of the child as being totally depraved.¹ Jonathan Edwards referred to them as "young vipers," and Cotton Mather, not a whit less complimentary, spoke of them as "children of wrath." The original sin of Adam had been visited upon them. A knowledge of the Scriptures and earnest prayer were necessary for their salvation.

Cotton Mather appealed most dramatically to the parents in this fashion:²

Oh, look upon the children which you have so often set on your knees, which always lie so very near your hearts. How can you bear to have them thrown into the place of the dragons? They infallibly go thither if by the knowledge of the holy scriptures you do not save them from thence.

He possessed equal talent in presenting his uncanny ideas to children:

Ah, children, be afraid of going prayerless to bed lest the devil be your bedfellow. Be afraid of playing on the Lord's Day lest the devil be your playfellow. Be afraid of telling lies or speaking wickedly lest that evil tongue be tormented in the flames when a drop of water to cool the tongue will be roared for.

So great was the danger menacing children and so necessary was it for them to have a knowledge of the Bible that Cotton Mather admonished the parents to compel the children to read the Scriptures daily. He even recommended that they be hired "to remember what they read, to get select sentences of the holy scriptures into their memories."

Since the minister usually represented the highest intellectual talent in the town and was the recognized authority on the Bible, it was only natural that he should exert considerable influence, directly and indirectly, over the religious and moral instruction in the public schools. Sometimes the children were sent to the minister, who examined them to see that they had the proper religious training; but usually the minister visited the school regularly to conduct devotional exercises and to see that the children had a proper understanding of the catechism and the sermon

¹ Ford, *The New England Primer*, New York, 1897, p. 1.

² Mather, *An Essay upon the Good Education of Children*, Boston, 1708, p. 18.

of the preceding Sunday. Down to 1826, when the selectmen were authorized to delegate their power to a school committee, the minister had a continuously decreasing power over the schools as a teacher, supervisor, or certifier of teachers.

Previous to the Revolution there were few textbooks in use in the schools, and, among those few, the Bible was naturally important. Newbury, for example, was using only the Bible and the catechism in her schools nearly a hundred years after her schools had been founded.¹

During the latter part of the seventeenth century, however, there appeared a book of heavy religious tone called the *New England Primer*. There can be no doubt that it was a true expression of the theological (not the religious) consciousness of its time. The enormous sale of the book and its long use testified that it had struck a popular chord.² It passed through many editions, but all those preceding the Revolution were essentially alike in spirit and contained about the same printed matter.

A *New England Primer* published in Boston in 1770 might be representative of the editions issued before the Revolution. It was crudely bound in oak boards, poorly printed on rough paper, and was almost small enough to put in one's vest pocket. On the inner side of the front cover were a morning and evening prayer for children, and on the first page was a picture of George III.³

The text proper began with the letters, followed by combinations of letters in one syllable, two syllables, etc. After the combinations of syllables and words there were a number of rhymed couplets, with cuts along the side to make the meaning clear. The couplets ran thus:

In Adam's Fall
We sinned all.
Heaven to find
The Bible mind.
Christ crucify'd
For sinners dy'd.

¹ Currier, *History of Newbury*, Boston, 1902, p. 408.

² Dexter, *History of Education in the United States*, New York and London, 1904, p. 211.

³ *The New England Primer*, Boston, 1770.

The Lord's Prayer, the Nicene Creed, and Watts' Cradle Hymn came next. The primer naturally contained a catechism. In this instance it was by John Cotton, and had the strange title: "Spiritual Milk for American Babes, Drawn out of the Breasts of Both Testaments for Their Souls' Nourishment."

The last selection in the primer purported to be a dialogue between Christ, a youth, and the devil. As the story goes, the youth resolves to spend his time in sport and play and disobey his parents, to the great delight of the devil. Christ tries to persuade the youth to change his mind, assuring him that the devil lies and that his ways are deceiving. As the youth is reticent, Christ affirms that he will be burned in hell. In reply the youth suggests that he knows that Christ has mercy; that it will be easy to repent when he is old; and that all his sport and play will speedily come to an end. The youth laments and begs for mercy, but Christ replies:

"No pity on thee can I show,
Thou hast thy God offended so;
Thy soul and body I'll divide,
Thy body in the grave I'll hide
And thy dear soul in Hell must lie
With devils to eternity."

A moral drawn from this dialogue ends the text. It reminds all children who are not submissive to their ministers and parents in youth that they may expect to go to hell and live under the eternal wrath.

Such was the *New England Primer*, which in one form or another journeyed on its way down to the middle of the nineteenth century, and for a hundred years at least was the principal text in the elementary school.

After the Revolution a new spirit began to be felt in the land. Independence had been won, the imagination had been fired, and a powerful interest had been awakened in politics. Printing presses were busily turning out newspapers and books, and the Bible was naturally read less. Economic conditions improved, many religious denominations sprang up, intercommunication was easier and quicker, commerce and trade took on new life, immigrants poured in; everybody began to feel a thrill of pride in the progress of the

new republic, and local pride and prejudice tended to break down. This growth of intellectual hospitality in response to new and powerful social interests was naturally reflected in the textbooks used in the public schools. For example, the *Boston Primer*, which claimed to be an improvement over the *New England Primer*, introduced some secular matter. On the first page we find the significant words:

He who ne'er learns his A.B.C.
Forever will a blockhead be.

The book also contained little selections which would appeal to children—an idea which had never been entertained by the old-time Puritan. One of the selections was entitled, "The Setting Sun and Rising Moon."¹

The readers and spelling books that were in use after the Revolution dropped out first the theological and then the biblical instruction. Many of the books took delight in giving specific moral directions. In the early editions of *Webster's Spelling Book* it was not unusual to find sentences like this:²

A good child will not lie, swear, nor steal. He will be good at home and ask to read his book; when he gets up he will wash his hands and face clean; he will comb his hair and make haste to school, he will not play by the way as bad boys do.

The new readers showed themselves more and more responsive to the vital interests of the time. The national spirit found expression in the speeches of the military and political leaders of the Revolution. With the rise of American men of letters, selections from Irving, Webster, Bryant, and Longfellow made their appearance.

Besides the multiplicity of interests that we have already noted, there was a rising jealousy of anything sectarian, which tended to crowd out the strictly theological and biblical instruction from the public schools. The emphasis then fell on moral instruction. Thus in 1845 we find the school committee of Cambridge urging the importance of good morals and good manners in the

¹ *The Boston Primer*, 1814.

² Johnson, *Old Time Schools and School Books*, New York and London, 1904, chap. vii.

schools, but expressly stating that sectarian influences must not creep in.¹ This denominational jealousy also showed itself in a state law enacted in 1827.² This law forbade the school committee's directing "any school books to be purchased or used" which were "calculated to favor any particular religious sect."

The plan of giving specific moral instruction through the school textbook has slowly given rise to a less direct method. The modern school textbook aims to fulfil an ethical mission through suggestion.

In 1828 the minister ceased to have any legal connection with the public schools.³ We might expect naturally as a result that the emphasis placed on direct moral instruction and the reading of the Bible would be decreased. There is no reason to believe, however, that the habit of reading the Bible daily in the public schools had become inoperative, or that the law of 1855,⁴ which made the daily reading of the Bible compulsory, established in most cases any new kind of practice.⁵ The history of education in Massachusetts shows that the state had always been very conservative in passing laws relating to public instruction. Invariably the law that is passed merely confirms and requires a practice which has become quite general throughout the state. This was doubtless true of the law of 1862, which still remains in force.⁶ It gave assurance that the old custom of the daily reading of the Bible in

¹ *Annual Report of the School Committee of Cambridge*, 1845.

² *Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, 1825-28, chap. cxliii, sec. 7.

³ Dexter, *A History of Education in the United States*, New York, 1906, pp. 81-83.

⁴ *Supplement to the Revised Statutes of Massachusetts*, 1854-59, chap. ccccx.

⁵ Horace Mann's investigations, while secretary of the State Board of Education, showed that the Bible was used in the school of every town in the state except three. These three did not answer his inquiry. The laws relating to the compulsory reading of the Bible were passed because the people believed that the state authorities were intent on banishing religion from the schools. See Martin, *Evolution of the Massachusetts School System*, New York, 1908, pp. 228-32, and Hinsdale, *Horace Mann and the Common School Revival in the United States*, New York, 1911, chap. ix.

⁶ This law reads as follows: "A portion of the Bible shall be read daily in the public schools, without written note or oral comment; but a pupil whose parent or guardian informs the teacher in writing that he has conscientious scruples against it, shall not be required to read from any particular version, or to take any personal part in the reading. The school committee shall not purchase or use school books in the public schools calculated to favor the tenets of any particular religious sect."

the schools should continue, and in such a way that it would arouse no sectarian differences. Massachusetts, the original home of Puritanism in America, is the only state of the New England group that has such a law on the statutes.

This law, with its flavor of mediaevalism, seems to be quite generally enforced, especially in the upper grades and in the high schools. Many teachers, however, seem to be ignorant of the law, or at least of its mandatory character; others, for pedagogical or other reasons, read the Bible only when it suits their whims or convenience.

The principal objection to the law seems to be a pedagogical one. It is said that the law defeats its own ends, if an understanding and appreciation of the Scriptures are its aims. The unusual style and the abstractness of thought in the Bible make it unintelligible to children unless there is some comment on the part of the teacher. The provisions of the law make this impossible. Again, the daily repetition of that which cannot be understood and appreciated fails to get or hold the attention, and leads to a feeling of tedium rather than reverence. It is inconceivable that such a state of mind should react in any effective way on the moral life of the child.

This argument, based on modern psychology, it should be said, does not exclude recognition of the Bible as literature and as the source of the greatest moral and religious treasures of our civilization. It would emphasize the fact that the church is an institution set apart by society to minister to the religious needs of man, and that, owing to denominational differences, the church, and not the school, must bear the responsibility of teaching the Bible. The present law does not provide for any real teaching of the Bible. It prevents the adaptability which is the soul of all true teaching.

But it is safe to say that the great majority of the people of Massachusetts would strenuously defend the old custom of the daily reading of the Bible in the public schools. It would be defended largely because of its age and history, and also because it is believed that it tends to furnish moral incentives and to develop a reverence for the Scriptures. Many good teachers maintain that selections may be taken from the Bible that will and do appeal to the interests and understanding of even little children.

Whatever arguments may be made for or against a law which was enacted more than half a century ago, it is fair to say that the opposition to this law is so feeble as scarcely to be worthy of consideration. The law will probably remain on the statute books, a unique monument to Puritanism, until unforeseen social changes create a new public sentiment which shall demand its repeal.